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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 PORT AU PRINCE 000583

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STATE FOR WHA/EX AND WHA/CAR  
ALSO FOR S/CRS  
INL FOR KEVIN BROWN AND ANGELIC YOUNG

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TAGS: PREL PGOV ECON HA PHUM ASEC  
SUBJECT: TEN DAYS IN APRIL: HAITI'S FOOD RIOTS

REF: A) PORT AU PRINCE 0544 B) PORT AU PRINCE 0556 C)  
PORT AU PRINCE 344 D) PORT AU PRINCE 144

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Classified By: Ambassador Janet A. Sanderson for reasons 1.4(b)and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: April 3-12, 2008 saw the most serious civil unrest Haiti has experienced since 2005. The violence had organization behind it, both criminal and political, although absolute numbers of demonstrators were small compared to the country's population. Embassy believes that pro-Aristide Lavalas politicians and drug trafficking elements likely played a role in fomenting violence but clearly lost control of their surrogates. MINUSTAH and the Haitian National Police were tested to the utmost. Two belated public addresses by President Preval, coupled with the Senate's ouster of the Alexis government, helped stop the unrest. At present, an uneasy calm has returned to Haiti, but there is widespread concern that disturbances could resume if popular demands are not met. The events of early April demonstrate that the gains made here since late 2006 are fragile indeed and can be threatened with relative ease. There are those who seek to use the food crisis for their own political or other ends and that will continue as the new government is formed. Ten days in April brought down the Haitian government, put the President on notice about the need to address the population's immediate needs, and reshuffled the Haitian political deck - for now. End summary.

THE PERFECT STORM BEGINS IN LES CAYES APRIL 3

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¶2. (C) On Friday, April 3, demonstrators took to the streets of Lasavanne, a slum located in Les Cayes, capital city of the South Department to protest the high price of food. The Les Cayes demonstrations took a turn when rioters aiming to free drug dealers being held in the Les Cayes prison infiltrated the food protesters and turned violent, targeting MINUSTAH (ref A). UNPOL held off repeated attempts for the first two days by rioters to break into MINUSTAH's headquarters. Three UN cars were burned and two houses rented by UN personnel ransacked. A mob threatened the hotel housing Senator Gabriel Fortune, who publicly echoed government statements that drug traffickers were behind the violence, and the politician had to be rescued by MINUSTAH. In the fray, hotel security guard fatally shot one of the attackers. MINUSTAH believes the Les Cayes violence was orchestrated by elements close to drug traffickers, perhaps

including fugitive Guy Philippe. The HNP transferred the seven Les Cayes inmates to Port-au-Prince April 10, after which Les Cayes returned to normal, with only a few residual and peaceful demonstrations protesting food prices.

¶3. (U) Prime Minister Alexis told the press April 4 that the people had a right to demonstrate in pursuit of legitimate grievances, but that they should do so within the law. He said the government believed that criminals, drug dealers and smugglers had organized the disruption in Les Cayes. At the same time, he unveiled a plan to accelerate disbursements from government programs already underway to create jobs.

. . AND SPREADS TO PORT-AU-PRINCE APRIL 7-10

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¶4. (SBU) The Prime Minister's statements id not have the desired effect. After a calm wekend throughout the country, demonstrations bega to break out in areas surrounding Port-au-Princeby mid-day, Monday, April 7. Although generally eaceful at the outset, protesters burned tires and erected barricades. Private group taxis (tap tas) were strongly encouraged to strike, and the geat majority complied. Demonstrations eventuallyspread to Carrefour and Martissant, slum areas i greater Port-au-Prince, as well as in several oher parts of the country such as Hinche, Gonaive, Jacmel, Port-de-Paix, Port Libete, Petit Goaves and Limbe. Demonstrations in provincial towns were largely peaceful, with a few exceptions.

¶5. (SBU) The violence in Port-au-Prince worsened the following day, Tuesday, April 8. MINUSTAH forces arrived mid-day as a crowd tried to break through the decorative iron-wrought gates in the front of the National Palace (ref

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B). Eye-witnesses and the press, as well as sources within MINUSTAH, reported that the HNP was unprepared to handle the crowd, estimated at 3000-4000, that had convened there to call for Preval to come march with them. Numerous small but violent demonstrations erupted throughout the city during the day, from the Champs de Mars area downtown to the wealthy suburbs of Petionville. Groups ranging from a dozen to hundreds of individuals formed throughout the capital, setting down burning tires and erecting barricades designed to block traffic on main thoroughfares. Demonstrators broke windows and looted many businesses in the town center, damaging some private residences. Many MINUSTAH vehicles in Port-au-Prince were stoned. Riots, however, ceased by nightfall as demonstrators melted away. By Wednesday evening, April 9 the situation had quieted, and Thursday, April 10 was far calmer still, with sporadic roadblocks, mainly in Martissant, and a confrontation with MINISTAH Sri Lankan units in Killick. Although there were demonstrations in many parts of the country, large parts of Haiti, especially in the North and in the nation's second largest city of Cap Haitian, remained calm.

¶6. (SBU) Haiti's capital bore the brunt of the April demonstrations. Although not large in size - the riots in PaP never numbered more than a few thousand in a country of 8.5 million - they often became violent. According to the Haitian National Police (HNP), MINUSTAH and private sector sources, at least 227 businesses and 22 gas stations were burned, looted or vandalized and 160 injuries (including 15 HNP and 22 UNPOL soldiers and police) were reported in Port-au-Prince. Press reports say five individuals were killed in Les Cayes (although MINUSTAH has not confirmed this), and two in Port-au-Prince. After the demonstrations had died down, a Nigerian UNPOL officer was shot and killed execution-style in Port-au-Prince on April 12 in circumstances which are still unclear.

¶17. (C) Acting UNSRSG Luis Da Costa told the Core Group mid-way through the week's events that the demonstrations had been "orchestrated from the beginning," and that organized elements, some of them armed, positioned themselves in the crowds and directed the tire-burning and erection of barricades. He declined to say by who masterminded the disruption in Port-au-Prince, but he said MINUSTAH was confident that elements linked to drug traffickers played key roles in Les Cayes. The MINUSTAH Political Adviser said that the protests in Les Cayes had been quickly infiltrated by elements bent on violence. MINUSTAH and other observers also noted that political elements, with their own agendas, had a role in encouraging the rioters but were unable to exert much control over them.

THE SECURITY RESPONSE

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¶18. (C) MINUSTAH Force Commander General dos Santos Cruz told the same meeting that his forces were severely stretched in addressing what was essential a political crisis rather than a long term security problem. He noted that MINUSTAH had an agreement with the GOH to guard thirteen critical government buildings, among them the National Palace, the parliament, the airport, ports, the Central Direction of the Judicial Police, and the central penitentiary. Public gatherings in Cite Soleil were the only ones in the city that had been exclusively peaceful. Santos Cruz stated that if there had been one or more central organizer who could control and direct the violence, the disturbances would have quickly spun out control. He added that the rioters had become increasingly aggressive, testing MINUSTAH soldiers. The previous day, rioters had fired a shotgun at MINUSTAH troops from behind, wounding three. One Minustah armored vehicle had been pierced by a large-caliber round.

¶19. (C) We believe that the events exposed critical weakness in the HNP (septel). It was slow off the mark, was caught flat-footed in Les Cayes April 3-4, and reacted slowly when disorders broke out in the capital. However, the HNP found

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its footing in Port-au-Prince and did learn to disperse small bands of demonstrators and quickly remove barricades. Contacts report that police officers did show up to work during the disturbances, a problem in the past which hampered law enforcement. Clearly hampered by shortages of supplies and communication failures, the HNP did as well as could be expected under the circumstances.

PREVAL TALKS BUT THE GOVERNMENT FALLS

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¶110. (C) Representatives of the international community, including Ambassador and A/SRSG Da Costa spent much of April 7-8 pressing Preval and his counselors to respond publicly to the disorders and address the nation. In keeping with his passive public profile, Preval, however, waited until the third day of rioting in Port-au-Prince, and six days after the rioting first began in Les Cayes, to do so. Speaking on national television April 9, Preval called for an end to the violence, which he said would only help raise prices and make the situation worse. He called for subsidies for Haitian farmers and on the sale of domestically produced goods, with the aim of replacing imports with "national production." Initial response among the Haitian political community, and in diplomatic and MINUSTAH circles, was that the address offered little substance, neglected to endorse its own government's program, and failed to hold out hope.

Nevertheless, protests subsided considerably beginning the next day.

¶11. (U) On April 12, nine days after the rioting first began, Preval went back on the air. In a nationally-televised press conference, repeatedly played throughout the day, flanked by major rice dealers and senior government officials, the president announced that rice importers had agreed to cut USD 3 from the USD 51 cost of a 50 kg sack of rice. The Haitian government, using financing from international donors, would cut an additional USD 5, bringing the cost to USD 43. However, this only applied to the 30,000 tons of rice already purchased by importers. He also said talks were underway with commercial banks to arrange longer-term purchases to insulate Haiti from future price increases. Preval also announced he would reduce the price of fertilizer by at least half. With no elaboration, he alluded to measures to aid Haitian farmers expand production and replace imported rice with local product. Preval coupled his economic proposals with an impassioned plea for an end to violence and for national unity in solving Haiti's problems.

¶12. (U) As Preval was speaking, sixteen senators -- just enough for a quorum -- passed a vote of no-confidence against Prime Minister Alexis in a session lasting barely thirty minutes. No senators opposed to the motion attended the session. "Artibonite in Action" Senator Youri Latortue, a long-time Alexis rival and potential presidential candidate, organized this ad hoc anti-Alexis coalition and Alexis's supporters feel unable to stop the juggernaut. Prior to the session, Latortue arranged for the sixteen senators who opposed Alexis to remain with him in incommunicado isolation to prevent defections. The first Preval address, on April 9, slowed the violence. His second address, and the simultaneous fall of the government, ended it, at least for now. Haiti has seen virtually no protests since April 12.

COMMENT: WHO WINS?

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¶13. (C) The events of the last weeks indicate that despite the gains made here since 2006, there are groups in Haiti committed to violence with links to criminal and, in some cases, political elements. These groups are still able to send their followers to the streets and shut down the country for a few days at a time. There is indeed a likely drug connection to the violence in Les Cayes. The origins of the violence in Port-au-Prince are more murky-- and likely more diverse - but we believe that elements linked to the pro-Aristide party Fanmi Lavalas had a hand in them this time around although it is unclear how well the political leadership was able to control activities of its surrogates.

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¶14. (C) FL, for its part, has denied any role in the riots which rocked Port-au-Prince. However, it escaped no one's notice here that FL organizer Father Jean Juste returned to Haiti the day before demonstrations began, and that he ceremoniously led a demonstration Monday morning before the violence broke out. Lavalas activist Annette Auguste (So' Anne) appeared on national television during the disturbances to deny Lavalas was behind the violence, but to threaten far larger demonstrations if the government failed to address the cost of living. FL Deputy Jonas Coffy made exactly the same point to Poloff earlier that same week. Preval was worried enough to send Presidential counselor Bob Manuel to So'Anne to tell her to cease and desist. (As an aside, we note with interest that there was very little mention of Aristide in these FL presentations or by the demonstrators on the streets, although Jean Juste did make a reference to him waiting with "his plane revved up on the tarmac" to come home.)

¶15. (C) At the end of the day, these demonstrations were primarily about politics. Those with genuine grievances - the cost of living and the daily grind of poverty here - often saw their message brutally hijacked by others with more political agendas. The effort to influence the political landscape after the events of April 3-13 continues apace, albeit in quieter circumstances this week. Fanmi Lavalas is seeking to leverage the violence into one or more seats in the cabinet of the next Prime Minister. Their unspoken message is that they can turn out the street again if thwarted. Presidential hopeful Senator Youri Latortue, with his own agenda, also made major capital out of the protests. He profited from the power and communications vacuum here, leading the successful effort to unseat PM Alexis and vaulting himself into a strong position in negotiations for naming the next Prime Minister. Preval himself has a role in this, with a new opportunity to redirect the country and re-energize the national agenda to address the very real needs of his people. Whatever the outcome of the ten days in April, Haitians still find themselves saddled with the familiar problems of security, stability, and putting food on the table.

SANDERSON